Bob Ross

Robert Norman Ross (October 29, 1942 – July 4, 1995) was an American painter, art instructor, and television host. He was the creator and host of *The Joy of Painting*, an instructional television program that aired from 1983 to 1994 on PBS in the United States, and also aired in Canada, Latin America, and Europe. Ross went from being a public television personality in the 1980s and 1990s to posthumously being an Internet celebrity in the 21st century, with his talent and kindness leading to major popularity with fans on YouTube, Twitch, and many other websites many years after his death.[1][2][3]

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Early life

Ross was born in Daytona Beach, Florida, to Jack and Ollie Ross (a Cherokee carpenter and a waitress, respectively), and raised in Orlando, Florida.[4][5] As a child, Ross entertained himself by caring for injured animals, purportedly including an armadillo, snake, and alligator. One of these animals, a squirrel named Peapod (full nickname "Peapod The Pocket Squirrel"), was featured most prominently in a few episodes of his show. Another squirrel, one with epilepsy Bob called "Squirrely Wirrelly Brown" (which was given 6 months to live by a veterinarian but

Bob Ross

Publicity photo of Ross at his easel

Born	Robert Norman Ross October 29, 1942 Daytona Beach, Florida, U.S.
Died	July 4, 1995 (aged 52) Orlando, Florida, U.S.
Occupation	Painter · art instructor · television host
Years active	1981–1994
Spouse(s)	Vivian Ridge (m. 1965; div. 1977) Jane Ross (m. 1977; died 1992) Lynda Brown (m. 1995)
Children	1
Military career	
Allegiance	United States of America
Service/ branch	United States Air Force
Years of service	1961–1981

Rank	Master Sergeant
Website	bobross.com (http://bobross.com)

Bob talked about her 4 to 5 years after getting her) was also on the show less frequently (she was usually kept at home in Ross's basement in a big cage next to where she'd watch him paint).[5][4] He had a half-brother, Jim, whom he mentioned in passing on his show.[6] Ross dropped out of high school in the 9th grade to work as a carpenter with his father, Jack Ross, when he lost part of his left index finger. This, however, did not affect the way he held his palette while painting.[7]:22

Military career

In 1961, 18-year-old Ross enlisted in the United States Air Force and was put into service as a medical records technician.[7]:15 He eventually rose to the rank of master sergeant and served as the first sergeant of the U.S. Air Force Clinic at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska,[8][9] where he first saw the snow and mountains that later became recurring themes in his artwork. He developed his quick-painting technique to create art for sale during brief daily work breaks.[9] Having held military positions that required him to be, in his own words, "tough" and "mean," "the guy who makes you scrub the latrine, the guy who makes you make your bed, the guy who screams at you for being late to work." Ross decided that if he ever left the military, he would never yell or raise his voice again.[9]

Career as a painter

During his 20-year tenure with the U.S. Air Force, Ross developed a taste for painting after attending an art class at the Anchorage U.S.O. club. He found himself frequently at odds with many of his painting instructors, who were more interested in abstract painting. In Ross's own words: "They'd tell you what makes a tree, but they wouldn't tell you how to paint a tree."

Ross was working as a part-time bartender when he discovered a TV show called *The Magic of Oil Painting*, hosted by German painter Bill Alexander.[7]:17–18 Alexander touted a 16th-century style of painting called "alla prima" (*Italian for "first attempt"*), better known as "wet-on-wet," that allowed him to finish a painting in a little under 30 minutes. Ross studied and became quite good at alla prima through Alexander's show, and began selling Alaskan landscapes painted on the inside of novelty gold-mining pans.[5][9] Eventually, Ross's income from gold pan sales surpassed his military salary. He retired from the Air Force in 1981 with the rank of Master Sergeant after 20 years of service.[5][10][8][11]

He first went to Florida and studied painting under Alexander, then joined the "Alexander Magic Art Supplies Company" and became a traveling salesman and tutor. Annette Kowalski, who had attended one of his sessions, became convinced that there was a great opportunity for Ross to succeed on his own, and persuaded him to do so. She invested her life savings in the company, as did Ross and his wife. The business struggled at first; his permed hairstyle came about as a cost-cutting measure, when his regular crewcut haircuts became too expensive. Ross grew increasingly uncomfortable with the style in his later years, but kept it throughout his career (he worried that changing it would hurt the brand, as his silhouette including the perm had become part of the production company's logo).[10][7]:19

The origins of the TV show, *The Joy of Painting*, are unclear.[10] It was filmed at the studio of the PBS station WIPB in Muncie, Indiana.[12]

The show ran from January 11, 1983 to May 17, 1994, but reruns still continue to appear in many broadcast areas and countries, including the non-commercial digital subchannel network Create. During each half-hour segment, Ross would instruct viewers in oil painting using a quick-study technique from the imagination that used a limited palette of paints and broke down the process into simple steps. Art critic Mira Schor compared him to Fred Rogers, host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, noting that Ross's soft voice and the slow pace of his speech were similar.[13]

With help from Annette and Walt Kowalski, Ross built a $15 million business, Bob Ross Inc., selling his line of art supplies and how-to books, and marketing painting classes taught by instructors trained in the "Bob Ross method."[14] All of his income, he said, was derived from those sources;[9] the show was intended to be a vehicle to promote his classes and products.[5] Following Ross's death, ownership of Bob Ross Inc. was passed to the Kowalskis.[15]

Ross also filmed wildlife, squirrels in particular, usually in his garden, and he would often take in injured or abandoned squirrels and other animals. Small animals often appeared on his *Joy of Painting* canvasses.[9]

Technique

Ross used the wet-on-wet oil painting technique, in which the painter continues adding paint on top of still-wet paint rather than waiting a lengthy amount of time to allow each layer of paint to dry. From the beginning, the program kept the selection of tools and colors simple so that viewers would not have to make large investments in expensive equipment. Ross frequently recommended odorless paint thinner (aka odorless mineral spirits) for brush cleaning. Combining the wet painting method with the use of large one- and two-inch brushes, as well as painting knives, allowed Ross to paint trees, clouds, mountains, and water in a matter of seconds. Each painting would start with simple strokes that appeared as nothing more than smudges of color. As he added more and more strokes,the blotches would transform into intricate landscapes.[14][16]

Ross painted three versions of almost every painting featured on his show. The first was painted prior to taping, and sat on an easel, off-camera, during filming, where Ross used it as a reference to create the second copy—the one viewers actually watched him paint. After filming the episode, Ross painted a more detailed version for inclusion in his instructional books.[17] The different versions were marked as follows on the side or back of the canvas: "Kowalski" for the initial version, "tv" for the version painted during the TV show, and "book" for the book version.[15]

Influences

Ross dedicated the first episode of the second season of *The Joy of Painting* to Bill Alexander, explaining that "years ago, Bill taught me this fantastic [wet-on-wet] technique, and I feel as though he gave me a precious gift, and I'd like to share that gift with you [the viewer]."[18] As Ross's popularity grew, his relationship with Alexander became increasingly strained. "He betrayed me," Alexander told *The New York Times* in 1991. "I invented 'wet on wet,' I trained him, and ... he thinks he can do it better."[19] Art historians have pointed out that the "wet-on-wet" (or alla prima) technique actually originated in Flanders during the 15th century, and was used by Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, Caravaggio, Paul Cézanne, John Singer Sargent, and Claude Monet, among many others.[20][21]

Style

Ross was well-known for the catchphrases he used while painting such as "happy little trees."[22] In most episodes of *The Joy of Painting*, Ross would note that one of his favorite parts of painting was cleaning the brush. Specifically, he was fond of his method of drying off a brush that he had dipped in odorless thinner by striking it against the can of thinner (then striking a box for early seasons, and a trash can on later seasons). Occasionally he would strike the brush hard on the trash can saying he "hit the bucket" and then on the easel. He would smile and often laugh aloud as he said to "beat the Devil out of it."[23] He also used a palette that had been lightly sanded down, which was necessary to avoid catching the reflections of the strong studio lighting.[24]

Ross wore clothes that he believed would be a "timeless look" (jeans and a button-down shirt). He also used a minimalist set and spoke as if he were only addressing one viewer.[5]

When asked about his laid-back approach, and his calm and contented demeanor, he commented,

> I got a letter from somebody here a while back, and they said, "Bob, everything in your world seems to be happy." That's for sure. That's why I paint. It's because I can create the kind of world that I want, and I can make this world as happy as I want it. Shoot, if you want bad stuff, watch the news.[25]

The landscapes he painted—typically mountains, lakes, snow, and log cabin scenes—were strongly influenced by his years living in Alaska, where he was stationed for the majority of his Air Force career. He repeatedly stated on the show his belief that everyone had inherent artistic talent and could become an accomplished artist given time, practice, and encouragement, and to this end was often fond of saying, "We don't make mistakes; we just have happy accidents."[26] In 2014, the blog FiveThirtyEight conducted a statistical analysis of the 381 episodes in which Ross painted live, concluding that 91 percent of Ross's paintings contained at least one tree, 44 percent included clouds, 39 percent included mountains and 34 percent included mountain lakes. By his own estimation, Ross completed more than 30,000 paintings in his lifetime.[27] His works rarely contained any human subjects or signs of human habitation; while he would include cabins on some paintings, he left the cabin's chimney without any signs of smoke, indicating the cabin was unoccupied.[15]

Other media appearances

Ross was fond of country music, and in 1987 he was invited on stage by Hank Snow at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee. The audience gave him a huge ovation; he was slightly nervous at first, but felt better after cracking a joke to the crowd. Snow was later given a private painting lesson by Ross.[28]

Ross visited New York City to promote his hardcover book, *The Best of the Joy of Painting with Bob Ross*,[29] and painting techniques to a studio audience several times. On one visit in 1989 he appeared on *The Joan Rivers Show*. He returned in 1992 for a live show with hosts Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford. There was one in 1994, when Phil Donahue, who watched his videos and loved his painting technique, invited him to the show to promote his work. Ross took five audience members on-stage to do a painting and even Phil himself did a painting and showed it in that episode.

In the early 1990s, Ross did several MTV promotional spots that, according to the *American City Business Journals*, "dovetailed perfectly with Generation X's burgeoning obsession with all things ironic and retro."[30]

Personal life

Ross had one son, Steven Ross, with his first wife, Vivian Ridge. Steven, also a talented painter, occasionally appeared on *The Joy of Painting* and became a Ross-certified instructor.[11] Steven appeared on camera in the last episode of Season 1, in which he read a series of general "how-to" questions sent in by viewers during the season, and Bob answered them one at a time, technique by technique, until he had completed an entire painting.

Ross and Ridge's marriage ended in divorce in 1977. Ross and his second wife, Jane, had no children together. In 1992, Jane died of cancer. In 1995, two months before his death, Ross married for a third time, to Lynda Brown.[31]

Ross was very secretive about his life and had a great liking for privacy, with only a tight circle of friends. Some of only a few interviews with his close-knit circle of friends and his family can be found in the 2011 PBS documentary *Bob Ross: The Happy Painter*.[10] His company, Bob Ross Inc., is protective of his intellectual property and his privacy to this day.[5][10]

Death

Ross died at the age of 52 on July 4, 1995, due to complications from lymphoma, which he had battled for several years.[11][32] His remains are interred at Woodlawn Memorial Park in Gotha, Florida, under a plaque marked: "Bob Ross; Television Artist".[33][34] Ross kept his diagnosis a secret from the general public, and his lymphoma was not known outside of his circle of family and friends until after his death.[5][10]

Legacy

Bob Ross T-shirts at Spencers in Washington State

Ross's likeness has become part of popular culture, with his image spoofed in shows, films, and video games like *Family Guy*,[35] *The Boondocks*,[36] *Deadpool 2*,[37] and *Smite*.[38] Bob Ross was also spoofed in the YouTube series *Epic Rap Battles of History* in the episode "Bob Ross vs. Pablo Picasso."

Google celebrated the 70th anniversary of his birth with a Google Doodle on October 29, 2012. It portrayed Ross painting a depiction of the letter "g" with a landscape in the background.[39][40] A board game titled *Bob Ross: The Art of Chill* was released and carried by Target stores,[41] while a Chia Pet model in Bob Ross's likeness was also released.[42] At one point Ross was going to have his own video game to be released on Wii, the Nintendo DS, and PC, with development handled by AGFRAG Entertainment Group,[43][44] although this never came to fruition.

Newfound interest in Ross occurred in 2015. As part of the launch of Twitch Creative, Twitch hosted a nine-day marathon of Bob Ross's *The Joy of Painting* series which started on October 29, 2015 in commemoration of what would have been his 73rd birthday.[45][46][47] Twitch reported that 5.6 million

viewers watched the marathon and, due to its popularity, created a weekly rebroadcast with one season of *The Joy of Painting* to air on Twitch each Monday. A portion of the advertising revenue has been promised to charities, including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.[48]

In June 2016, Ross's series *Beauty Is Everywhere* was added to the Netflix lineup. The 30-minute episodes are taken from seasons 20, 21 and 22 of the original *The Joy of Painting* series.[49][50] The newfound interest surprised the Kowalskis, since they were managing Ross's image and *The Joy of Painting* episodes. They created a YouTube channel for Ross which gained over one million subscribers within a year.[15]

The renewed interest in Ross also led to questions of where his paintings were located, given that it was estimated over 1,000 works were created for *The Joy of Painting*. In an investigative report by *The New York Times*, the Kowalskis affirmed that they still held all of his paintings, though without the proper care generally needed to store art. Prompted by numerous letters from fans of Ross, the Smithsonian American Art Museum contacted the Kowalskis and offered to take a selection of Ross's paintings, along with other items from the show, to place on exhibit at the Museum.[15]

ASMR

The Twitch streams created a new interest in Bob Ross from the younger generation, and caused his popularity to grow.[15] His videos became popular with devotees of the autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR).[12] ASMR refers to a euphoric feeling, which can be experienced in a variety of ways; triggers can be aural, touch-based or both.[51] "He's sort of the godfather of ASMR," says Joan Kowalski, the president of Bob Ross Inc. "People were into Bob Ross for ASMR reasons before there was ASMR."[51]

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External links

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- Bob Ross (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/19437) at Find a Grave
- Bob Ross's channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/BobRossInc) on YouTube
- Bob Ross (https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1470679/) on IMDb
- Bob Ross (http://www.twitch.tv/bobross) on Twitch
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